


A Real Show-Stop



Damage from
Hornet midair

Navy photo by LCDR Lance Norton

by LCDR. Lance Norton

What a great deal! I was scheduled to fly what most strike-fighter pilots consider our best mission – an air-to-air 2 v 2 – and I was the flight lead. After arriving at the squadron and checking the weather (clear and a million), I checked with ops to ensure we had all the players for the event.

After making a few minor changes to the line-up, we decided to go with a three-plane event and make it a 2 v 1. We still could get some great intercept training and ACM. I briefed the event and covered all the Admin, TAC Admin, training rules, and conduct of the flight. All three members would get the chance to lead a section, be a wingman, and play the adversary. That way, we'd maximize the training and make ops happy to boot.

At the end of the brief, I covered the all-important ORM portion of the brief: "Today our main objective is to not run into each other. Let's be heads up for each other out there."

We launched, joined up and climbed out over the always heavily congested airspace of our metro area. We were in the MOA in what seemed like no time. I split up the flight, and we completed our G-warm-up and fence

checks. As the first Blue air lead of the section, I would play bogey for the next run, and be Blue air wingman for the last run. The first two runs went as briefed, with all of us getting some good radar work, intercept maneuvering, and some of that coveted engaged-burner time. It seemed more like fun than work.

As I passed the lead and became the wingman, we called sight of each other and began climbing and heading east for separation for the next intercept. After leveling off in combat spread, with me slightly sucked, I noticed we were getting close to the eastern edge of the area. After a few more potatoes, I decided to give my lead a sugar call for him to check his position. I said, "Recommend a turn back to the west for area." Lead immediately started an aggressive, 180-degree right turn. I assumed (not a good word in naval aviation) that he was executing an uncalled, in-place right turn. Since the turn was away from me, I followed him through about 120 degrees until I lost sight of him as he passed underneath my nose.

A second later, he called on the radio, "Sharks, reference 300 degrees." I pulled to the new 300-degree heading, rolled out, and looked left for my lead. I expected to see him to my left, level or slightly higher, but he was nowhere in sight.

"Hmmm," I thought. "That's odd. He should be there. OK, look right." Again, nowhere in sight. This is where the hair on the back of the neck starts to stand up. Could he be underneath me? Not wanting to find out the



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Navy photos by LCdr A. Kimbell
Photo composition by Yvonne Dawson

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hard way, I lifted the nose and rolled right for the belly check. He wasn't there, either. Thinking I missed him in the sun or haze, I began to key the mike and call "Blind"—in hindsight, something I should have done as soon as I didn't see lead out of the turn.


I caught the silhouette of my lead high, to my right, and within about 100 feet. I was closing rapidly on collision bearing! Instinctively, I pushed the stick and then realized, with only one or two seconds before impact, this reaction wouldn't cut it. I snap rolled left and pulled to avoid the impending collision. My life didn't flash in front of my eyes, which I think is a good thing. I felt a sickening "thump" and an immediate, uncontrolled roll back to the right, ending up wings level. The unthinkable has just happened: I'd had a midair at close to 350 knots.

My aircraft still was flying and controllable. I immediately thought about my wingman. Lead came up on the radio and called, "Knock it off." That was the most reassuring sound I ever had heard. He was OK and flying normally.

We regained sight and diverted to our briefed divert field, an air force base 45 miles

away. My right trailing-edge flap (which came completely off) and right horizontal stab (which was all but torn off) had hit the bottom of my lead's aircraft. The collision had damaged lead's pitot-static system, nose landing-gear doors and left leading-edge extension.

How could this have happened? We had come within milliseconds of a disastrous, Class A mishap during a simple, daytime section maneuver we have all done hundreds, if not thousands, of times.

Well, "simple" maneuvers have killed dozens of aviators, destroyed hundreds of aircraft, and cost millions of man-hours in repairs. We had gotten too comfortable. I assumed my lead was performing an in-place section turn and maneuvered my aircraft accordingly. In actuality, he performed a section turn-in and assumed I was in tac-wing position. I hesitated to call blind and should have right away. If my lead also had looked for me, we very well could have averted this near-tragedy. 

LCdr. Norton flies with VFA-203.